



November 7, 1878 - Austrian/Swedish physicist Lise Meitner discovered protactinium

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General Note

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Lise Meitner was born on 7 November 1878 in Vienna, Austria, and educated at the Universities of Vienna and Berlin. He was an Austrian-Swedish physicist, who first identified nuclear fission. In association with German physical chemist Otto Hahn, she helped to discover the element protactinium in 1918, and she was a professor of physics at the University of Berlin from 1926 to 1933. In 1938 she left Germany and went to Sweden to join the atomic research staff at the University of Stockholm. In 1939 Meitner published the first paper concerning nuclear fission. She is also known for her research on atomic theory and radioactivity. In her work she predicted the existence of chain reaction, which contributed to the development of the atomic bomb. In 1946 she was a visiting professor at Catholic University in Washington, D.C., and in 1959 she revisited the United States to lecture at Bryn Mawr College. In 1997 the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry announced that the chemical element with the atomic number 109 would be given the official name meitnerium (Mt) in her honor. Meitner is often mentioned as one of the most glaring examples of women's scientific achievement overlooked by the Nobel committee. Over her brilliant career she published over 135 scientific papers. In 1945, the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry to Otto Hahn for the discovery of nuclear fission. Due to the separation of the former collaborators, Meitner received no recognition from the Nobel committee in relation to this award. To make matters worse, Hahn publicly downplayed Meitner's contributions to his research. Meitner never fully recovered from this denial, despite Niels Bohr's efforts to set the record straight. In 1966 the Nobel "mistake" was partly rectified when Hahn, Meitner, and Strassman were jointly awarded the U.S. sponsored Enrico Fermi Prize. Her physical and mental condition weakened by atherosclerosis, she was unable to travel to the US to receive the Enrico Fermi prize and relatives had to present it to her. After breaking her hip in a fall and suffering several small strokes in 1967, Meitner made a partial recovery, but eventually was weakened to the point where she moved into a Cambridge nursing home. She died on 27 October 1968 at the age of 89. She was buried in the village of Bramley in Hampshire, at St. James parish church, close to her younger brother Walter, who had died in 1964.